

Open Society Institute Syringe Access Fund Reception
July 24, 2012

Thanks to the Syringe Access Fund, we are at a place where President Obama's goal of an AIDS-free generation is within reach.

I am proud to be honored alongside my distinguished colleagues Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, Congresswoman Barbara Lee, Congressman Jose Serrano and Senator Dick Durbin.

We are also here to pay tribute to the supporters of the Syringe Access Fund, including the Elton John AIDS Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Levi Strauss Foundation, the Irene Diamond Fund, and AIDS United. Each of your organizations has led the fight against this disease in injection drug users.

Just over thirty years ago, AIDS was still an unnamed disease when I chaired the first hearing in April of 1982. We've come a long way.

- **The Ryan White CARE Act** currently serves more than half a million low-income people living with HIV/AIDS.
- **The Affordable Care Act** will soon provide comprehensive coverage to over 30 million uninsured Americans and greatly benefit the 1.2 million people living with HIV/AIDS.

But -- as you all know -- the risk for disease is highest among our most vulnerable and oftentimes hardest-to-reach populations—gay men, sex workers, and injection drug users.

- An alarming nine percent of injection drug users have HIV, with half not knowing their status. That's over twice the overall rate in the general population.

- Study after study has confirmed that needle exchange programs prevent disease transmission and reduce drug use. Just as critically, these programs allow us to reach drug users with substance abuse treatment, HIV testing, and access to life-saving care for those who are already HIV positive.
- Regrettably, many members of Congress continue to put ideology ahead of science and refuse to allow federal support for these programs.
- Washington, DC has the highest HIV rate in the country -- at a staggering three percent -- in part because Congress banned the city from using even its local funds to run needle exchange programs.

HIV is not the death sentence it once was. But we still have many challenges to overcome. I am confident that with your continued leadership and dedication to this fight, we will make tremendous progress over the coming years.